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### The Growing Church: A Case Study in Leadership for Change

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## THE GROWING CHURCH: A CASE STUDY IN LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE

COURTNY B. DAVIS OLDS

### Abstract

This article presents a case study of one church that has overcome the deep-seated resistance to change found in most congregations. The church's story is told; an analysis of key themes is grounded in relevant scholarship; and insights are drawn that could inform leadership for change in other congregational settings. In keeping with the church's name, steps associated with the cultivation of plants are used to structure the article.

### Surveying: A Brief Appraisal

Thirty years ago, Fairview Denominational Church was largely what one would expect from an established, Euro-American church in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area. Worship services were restrained and formal, with hymns and an organ. The congregation was sizeable, with mostly middle- to upper-middle-class members attired in their best clothes. Theologically, the church tended toward the conservative side of the spectrum. And, like most all churches, Fairview Denominational Church was not immune to the decline brought about by the shifting religious landscape in the United States.

Today, Fairview Denominational Church has transformed into The Growing Church, and it is largely unlike what one would expect, given its history and origins. Worship services are loud and unrestrained, with a house band and a variety of songs. The congregation is smaller, with some ethnic diversity and members from a wide socioeconomic spectrum; no one dresses in anything more formal than jeans on Sunday mornings. Theologically, the church is thoroughly evangelical and LGBT-affirming. It also has a strong environmental focus that is reflected in its new, rural location. And, unlike many churches, The Growing Church is thriving.

One cannot help but wonder: How did this drastic transformation take place? And what insights might this church's story hold for other congregations?

### **Plowing: Case Study Introduction**

Since at least 2000, church attendance in the United States has been on the decline.<sup>1</sup> Although first noted in churches affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations, the trend has expanded to include evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic churches as well.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the percentage of the U.S. population who identify as Christian has decreased significantly, and the percentage of those claiming no religious affiliation has increased dramatically.<sup>3</sup> These findings have been widely reported in mainstream news outlets,<sup>4</sup> and the trends are well-known and much lamented among churchgoers and clergy alike.

Although opinions differ on how best to respond to this present reality, many within Christian circles would argue that churches must find new ways of “being” and “doing.” Yet churches are notoriously resistant to change. While the United States’ religious landscape shifted around them in recent years, churches stayed essentially the same. A

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Roozen, “American Congregations 2010: A Decade of Change in American Congregations 2000–2010,” *A Faith Communities Today* Research Report (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Institute for Religious Research): 2, 14.

<sup>2</sup> David A. Roozen, “Negative Numbers: The Decline Narrative Reaches Evangelicals,” *Christian Century* 130(25) (December 11, 2013): 10.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *A Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study Report* (May 12, 2015): 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> For example: NPR Staff, “Losing Faith: A Religious Leader on America’s Disillusionment with Church,” *National Public Radio* online, May 16, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/16/407073073/losing-faith-a-religious-leader-on-americas-disillusionment-with-church>; Nate Cohn, “Big Drop in Share of Americans Calling Themselves Christian,” *The New York Times* online, May 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/upshot/big-drop-in-share-of-americans-calling-themselves-christian.html>; Denver Nicks, “The U.S. Is Becoming Less Religious, Survey Shows,” *Time Magazine* online, November 3, 2015, <http://time.com/4098544/u-s-becoming-less-religious-survey/?iid=sr-link2>.

comprehensive survey of U.S. congregations found most churches to be impervious to innovation in their worship style, programming, and theological emphasis, in spite of the companion finding that growth and vitality are directly tied to innovation.<sup>5</sup> Even more troubling for the future is that the percentage of congregations that are willing to adjust in order to meet new challenges has continued to decline.<sup>6</sup>

Some churches, however, appear to be defying the trends. This case study,<sup>7</sup> which takes place against the backdrop of the shifting religious landscape in the United States and the deep-seated resistance to change found in most congregations, focuses on a congregation that embraced change: The Growing Church, formerly known as Fairview Denominational Church.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this article is to tell that church's story,<sup>9</sup> to ground an analysis of key themes in relevant scholarship, and to draw insights that could inform leadership for change in other congregational settings.

### **Planting: The Church's Story**

Fairview Denominational Church (FDC, or Fairview) did not become The Growing Church (TGC) as a result of a single change initiative. Rather, the transformation resulted from numerous change initiatives over the course of three decades. These seeds eventually yielded The Growing Church.

The Rev. Dr. Robin Matthews, age 56, has been senior pastor of what is now The Growing Church for twenty-six

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<sup>5</sup> David A. Roozen, "American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving," *A Faith Communities Today* Research Report (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Institute for Religious Research), 9–12.

<sup>6</sup> Roozen, "American Congregation 2015," 14.

<sup>7</sup> This case study was approved by the Internal Review Board of Antioch University.

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the church's current and former name, and for all participants in this case study.

<sup>9</sup> The church's story is reconstructed from interviews with the case-study participants and my own observations during two visits to the church.

years.<sup>10</sup> She arrived at Fairview Denominational Church as a seminary intern more than thirty years ago. At that time, FDC was, in her words, “a very traditional church.” Founded in 1898 in an inner suburb of a large city, FDC was an established congregation with large, impressive facilities and 350 people on the membership list. Each Sunday, several hundred people gathered for restrained worship services that featured hymns, organ music, and formal attire. Thoroughly traditional in many ways, FDC was nevertheless a rebel when compared to the neighborhood in which it was located. The neighborhood was predominantly Roman Catholic, Republican, and conservative. FDC was affiliated with a Protestant denomination, its membership skewed Democrat, and the church had a history of social engagement that, at best, made it an outlier in the neighborhood or, at worst, resulted in conflict with the surrounding community.<sup>11</sup> Although FDC was traditional in many regards, “It was the personality of the church all along to do crazy stuff,” according to Matthews. After she graduated from seminary, Matthews was hired by FDC as an assistant pastor. Several years later, she became co-pastor. In 1990, she assumed the role of solo senior pastor when her co-pastor became ill, retired, and assumed the role of pastor emeritus. Throughout her time as senior pastor, Matthews has capitalized on the church’s historical propensity “to do crazy stuff,” and the church has broken away from the “traditional” label in order to keep pace with a changing world. The transformation from Fairview Denominational Church to The Growing Church exemplifies this.

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<sup>10</sup> Participant ages and tenures with the church are noted as of the time of the interviews, which took place from December 2015 to January 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For example: Then-seminarian Martin Luther King, Jr., preached at FDC on more than one occasion, drawing a large African American crowd to the overwhelmingly Euro-American church and neighborhood. Much later, in the 1990s, FDC allowed local bands to use its facilities for rock concerts when they were barred from playing elsewhere in the neighborhood; numerous complaints and several citations for noise violations ensued.

The first seed that would become The Growing Church was planted as a strategic response to a growing dissatisfaction among congregants. Like many churches within its denomination, FDC relied on a number of boards and committees to oversee the church's ministries and governance. Also like many of its sister churches with such a structure, FDC was slow to make decisions and to move from idea to action. Matthews found that many congregants were becoming frustrated with this process, so in her first year as senior pastor, she proposed a new structure that would be more efficient and effective: a single board divided into elders, with responsibility for overall guidance and leadership, and deacons, with responsibility for the church's physical property and assets. Such a structure was unfamiliar to many in the church, yet it was received well and it streamlined decision-making. The change initiatives that followed, however, were more controversial and divisive.

The second seed was a theological shift. In the early-1990s, while maintaining her role as senior pastor of Fairview Denominational Church, Matthews started a Sunday evening worship service for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community<sup>12</sup> a few miles away in the city. Though Matthew's theology had at one time aligned with FDC's conservative stance on sexuality, her theology had more recently shifted as a result of intensive biblical study and reflection. Desiring to minister to the LGBT community and knowing it was not possible to do so through FDC, Matthews began the downtown worship service independent of the church. At the same time, however, she and the pastor emeritus led studies and small groups at FDC around the topic of sexuality, laying the foundation for the exploration of a different theological perspective. After several years of study by FDC and separation between the two congregations, Fairview's

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<sup>12</sup> Recognizing that the current terminology is LGBTQIA, for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/abstaining," I nevertheless use LGBT throughout this article in faithfulness to the terminology used by the case-study participants.

implicit “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was rescinded when the downtown worshippers were welcomed to FDC and all congregants—new attendees and established members—were given the freedom to be open about their sexuality. This, predictably, proved to be far more controversial and divisive than the earlier change to the church structure. For many members of FDC, the acceptance of openly LGBT persons was utterly incompatible with their interpretation of the Bible and their understanding of the Christian faith. A sizable contingent of the congregation disassociated from the church as soon as the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was rescinded. Others followed as the theological shift took firm root during the ensuing months. At the same time, the church gained new members who were attracted by the welcome extended to the LGBT community. When Fairview later held a congregational vote on becoming a recognized “welcoming and affirming” congregation, the motion was unanimously approved.

The next significant seed was related to the practice of worship. In the course of becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation, FDC experienced the exodus of many longtime, stalwart members and an influx of new members, many of whom were younger than the émigrés and less steeped in traditional church culture. The hymns, organ music, formal attire, and restrained worship for which Fairview was known did not appeal to the newer members, nor did they appeal to many of the younger members who had spent their lives at the church. In response to the church’s changing demographic, and in an effort to engage newer, younger members in the church, some changes were made to the worship services. Hymns were eliminated, contemporary worship songs were added, and the musicians in the congregation formed a band. As a result, worship services became more informal, less traditional, and noticeably louder. This shift, according to Matthews, was even more difficult than the journey to becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation, in part because those who were adamantly opposed to the new worship style did

not immediately leave the church as former disaffected members had. Rather, they remained at FDC, making their dissatisfaction known and polarizing the congregation over more than just the music. Eventually, some of these members left FDC, while others came around to the louder, less formal, contemporary worship style. Matthews described those who remained as “lovable, unselfish people [who] were willing to change because that’s what [the church] needed to do to stay alive.”

Through attrition,<sup>13</sup> schism, and change-induced exodus, the membership of Fairview Denominational Church in the late-1990s and early-2000s was a mere fraction of the 350 people who were on the membership list when Matthews first arrived at the church in the mid-1980s. Yet in spite of its tumultuous history, FDC was remarkably healthy, according to Matthews and Linda D. Burke, Esq., who joined around this time.

Burke, age 60, joined FDC in the early 2000s. Though she had a strong Christian upbringing, was active in a church through young adulthood, and identified as a Christian from age 19, Burke had not been part of a church for nearly twenty years when she began attending Fairview Denominational Church. The churches that shared her approach to scripture did not accept her as a lesbian; the churches that accepted her as a lesbian were not, in her words, “Bible-based.” Rather than hide her identity or cast off her theology, Burke elected to abandon the church, but she did not abandon her Christian faith. When she and her then-partner, now wife, adopted their son, they searched for a church in which they would be welcomed as a family. Their search led them to Fairview, which was, in Burke’s words, “LGBT-friendly and Bible-believing.” FDC also had solid preaching, extensive Bible studies, a conspicuous dearth of “negative, rigid people,” and an overall friendly, accepting character.

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<sup>13</sup> As noted in the previous section, churches of all denominations and affiliations were experiencing a membership decline during this time.



In spite of its vitality in other regards, however, FDC struggled financially during this period. The small congregation was unable to maintain facilities that covered an entire suburban block and were sized for several hundred congregants who were no longer present. Financial giving had declined. The income generated from renting the chapel to an immigrant congregation was not enough to offset expenses. Because of the significant financial and human resources dedicated to keeping the church solvent and the facilities intact, “it seemed more like [congregants and staff] were running an institution, rather than being a church,” according to Matthews. Meanwhile, the church had a newfound vision for environmental stewardship that could not be brought to fruition in their concrete-laden suburban neighborhood.

This combination of financial insufficiency and environmental consciousness was the final seed of The Growing Church. Recognizing they could neither maintain the existing facilities nor achieve their vision for an eco-friendly church in the present location, FDC made the decision in 2012 to sell the suburban property and relocate. Around this time, they also selected a new name. Going forward, Fairview Denominational Church would be known as The Growing Church. The immigrant congregation who had been renting FDC’s chapel for several years was quickly identified as a potential buyer of the suburban property. The process of finding a new location for what was now The Growing Church, however, was not as straightforward. Burke, the church’s moderator and chairperson of the board, described it as “a treasure hunt.” Over a period of months, church leaders looked at several properties in rural communities beyond the suburbs with space for a building, a community garden, and, eventually, animals. A bid was placed on one such property, but it was not accepted. The congregation continued to wait. Then, Matthews had a dream about a house with a distinctive exterior. Matthews did not recognize the house, but she clearly sensed that it was in some way connected to the church’s future location.

When Matthews shared her dream with the church's leadership, Burke immediately recognized the description of the house: it was in an unincorporated community approximately twenty-five miles from the FDC neighborhood, and it was for sale.

Sometime in 2013, the church purchased what was dubbed "The Castle"<sup>14</sup> when the offer on their suburban property was officially secured. Although there was near-unanimous support for this move, two members left over the decision to sell the former property and purchase The Castle. According to Burke, they believed the church had to be a building, and there was no building initially. Though it served as the parsonage and the church's fellowship hall and offices, The Castle could not be used for worship services due to zoning regulations. Instead, the church's leadership made arrangements to hold worship services in a local park or community center, weather depending, while the treasure hunt continued.

Burke was as instrumental in locating the church's new building as she was in identifying the house in Matthews's dream. In searching local real estate records, Burke noted a listing for a church less than a half-mile from The Castle. However, there was no signage on the property itself to indicate that it was for sale. Burke nevertheless contacted the church's pastor, who explained that the property, which included a small church building and eleven acres of land, had recently been taken off the market because no acceptable offers had been received. The Growing Church made an offer, not even realizing that the property was zoned for the farm stands and agricultural endeavors that were central to TGC's evolving vision. The sale closed as soon as the sale of the former FDC property to the immigrant congregation was finalized and settled. Said Burke of the church's response to the treasure hunt that led to The Castle and TGC's eleven-acre property, "We really feel that God led us there, because everything just fell into place."

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<sup>14</sup> Also a pseudonym.

The Growing Church has been organized under its new name and in its new location for more than three years. Worship attendance hovers around sixty, and the church has recently embarked on a campaign to double the size of the congregation in two years' time. Since the church settled into its new identity and location, none of the existing members have left, and some of those who exited during the earlier times of uncertainty and transition have now returned. New members, who were not present when the seeds of change were planted, have also joined. One such new member is Randy Horst, age 40, who joined The Growing Church a year and a half ago. After feeling there was "something missing," or some disconnect between belief and practice, in other churches he had attended, Horst visited TGC on the advice of a friend, who simply said, "It's different. You should come and try it." What Host found was a "welcoming, growing, faithful, nonjudgmental family" that eats together every Sunday after worship services, "helps people out when they need it," accepts everyone for who they are, and is faithful to God above all else. Accounts such as these indicate that TGC has successfully weathered its three-decade season of change.

### **Sprouting: An Analysis of Key Themes**

An analysis of The Growing Church's story reveals a number of key themes, each of which can be grounded in scholarship from the fields of theology, organization development, and leadership.

#### *Missional Identity*

The first theme is the church's embrace of its identity. While TGC's evangelical theology,<sup>15</sup> LGBT-affirming stance,

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<sup>15</sup> The National Association of Evangelicals and LifeWay Research categorize evangelicals as those who "strongly agree" with the following four statements: "The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe. It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior. Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ

and commitment to creation care are prominent characteristics of the church, they are not the church's identity. Instead, TGC's identity is rooted in its relationship with God, and by extension, in the members' relationships with one another. This relationship with God was at the center of every seed that led to The Growing Church. During each change initiative and at each crossroads, Matthews and the congregation together sought to be faithful in following God's leading, even when doing so took them on paths they had not imagined. TGC's relationship with God is also at the center of the members' relationships with each other. Believing they are loved and accepted by God, the people of The Growing Church strive to be loving toward and accepting of others as well. This acceptance is certainly modeled in the church's stance on LGBT issues, and it extends beyond sexuality to lifestyle and life situation as well: cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, manner of dress, socioeconomic status, family composition, faults and foibles. With its identity centered on God's character and purpose, and with its intentional engagement with a changing world, The Growing Church exhibits aspects of a missional understanding of church. From a missional perspective, church is not a place, but a body of people; a church's purpose is not institutional perpetuation, but joining in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world.<sup>16</sup> As a missional church, then, TGC "emphasizes an incarnational, servant approach and sees church not as a once-a-week gathering but as a community to which one

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alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation."

NAE/LifeWay Research, "What Is an Evangelical? Defining Evangelicals in Research," National Association of Evangelicals/LifeWay Research (accessed May 5, 2016) <http://nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>. It was evident from interviews and observation that the members of The Growing Church meet these criteria.

<sup>16</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 81.

belongs that relates to the whole of life.”<sup>17</sup> Although the word “missional” was not mentioned in any of my interviews with case study participants, these central features of a missional church were readily evident.

### *Church as a Learning Organization*

A second theme is the persistence of the church’s existence. On any number of occasions, Fairview Denominational Church/The Growing Church could have chosen to close when faced with internal and external factors that necessitated a change in the status quo. Instead, the church chose to adapt. In doing so, it displayed characteristics of a learning organization. Learning organizations are highly adaptable, integrated systems that exhibit a willingness to look at and respond to the world in new ways.<sup>18</sup> In a learning organization, curiosity and the desire to learn are cultivated at all levels,<sup>19</sup> and the impetus for change is derived from an intrinsic desire to align the current reality with the organization’s vision.<sup>20</sup> As the case study demonstrates, TGC has shown a remarkable ability to adapt in the past three decades, even during its days as FDC. In recent years, a desire to embody the church’s fourfold vision—“To love God above all else. To love others. To love ourselves. To love God’s creation.”—has been the driving force behind changes at The Growing Church, including the change of name and location. Congregants have actively and intentionally engaged in learning how to align their faith with their daily living; there is a sense that such learning is the responsibility of all who are part of the church, not just the leadership, and that to be part of TGC entails constant learning in response to new needs in an evolving context.

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<sup>17</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Church Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Peter M. Senge “The Leader’s New Work: Building Learning Organization,” *Sloan Management Review* 32(1) (Fall 1990): 8.

<sup>19</sup> Senge, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Senge, 9–10.

*Leadership Theories in Practice*

A third key theme evident throughout this case study is the role of leadership in the process of change. Matthews's tenure with the church is notable for its longevity: her twenty-six-year pastorate is four to six times longer than the average pastoral tenure.<sup>21</sup> Yet leadership of TGC is not confined to Matthews. Many others have played and continue to play an important role in the church's leadership, from associate pastors to congregation members to the elders and deacons. Complexity leadership theory, transformational leadership, and the social identity theory of leadership all have bearing on the theme of leadership in TGC's story.

The social identity theory of leadership posits that effective leaders are those who are perceived by the group as "prototypical," or representing the group's particular norms and identity.<sup>22</sup> Because of their strong identity with the group, prototypical leaders are granted influence, trust, and a high standing by the group.<sup>23</sup> Because they have trust, influence, and high standing, prototypical leaders are able to lead the group to innovate and to change.<sup>24</sup> These elements of the social identity theory of leadership are evident with Robin Matthews and The Growing Church. Matthews's personal theology and personality align with the church's collective theology and personality. In addition, it was apparent from interviews and from observation that Matthews is considered, and considers herself, part of the church community rather than ruler over it; she is "Pastor Robin," but from the perspective of the congregants, she is also "one of us." Based on her identification with the group and the group's identification with her, Matthews enjoys a

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<sup>21</sup> Four to seven years is a typical tenure.

<sup>22</sup> Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity of Leadership," in *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, eds. John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010), 802.

<sup>23</sup> Hogg, 802.

<sup>24</sup> Hogg, 803.

high level of trust; as a result, TGC willingly followed her leadership during times of transition and uncertainty.

Transformational leadership “broaden[s] and elevate[s] the interests of [followers], ...generate[s] awareness and acceptance of the purpose and mission of the group, and...stir[s] [followers] to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group.”<sup>25</sup> In doing so, transformational leadership fosters group cohesiveness, as individual members increasingly self-identify with the group’s vision, mission, and goals.<sup>26</sup> This increased cohesiveness leads to a stronger group identity, which, according to the social identity theory of leadership, further reinforces the status of the prototypical leader. A story from Matthews’s interview provides an example of this interplay between transformational leadership and group identity: When an older, male, Euro-American, heterosexual, longtime congregant stopped attending church activities because it was announced that a younger, African American, gay man would be preaching at TGC, Matthews said to the congregant, frankly, “You have been at this church all this time. Where is this coming from?” The man acknowledged that his opposition was not in keeping with the church’s beliefs, nor was it something he was proud of; nevertheless, he was struggling to support the plan to invite the guest preacher. Matthews gently responded to him, “I know it’s hard, but you can rise to the occasion. [The young man] is going to preach, and you have to get over it. I know you can see things with different eyes.” In the mode of a transformational leader, Matthews challenged the congregant to adopt a different a perspective and alter his priorities. She also inspired him to more strongly connect with the church’s

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<sup>25</sup> Bernard Bass, “From Transactional to Transformational Leadership: Learning to Share the Vision,” *Organizational Dynamics* 18(3) (Winter 1990): 21.

<sup>26</sup> Fred O. Walumbwa, Bruce J. Avolio, and Chad Hartnell, “Transformational Leadership Theories,” in *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, ed. John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010), 935.

values, for the good of the entire church.<sup>27</sup> According to the social identity theory of leadership, this congregant's transformation strengthened TGC's identity, which in turn reinforced Matthews's prototypicality as a leader.

Complexity leadership theory, which emerged in recent decades in response to the "dynamic, distributed, and contextual nature of leadership" in postindustrial, knowledge-based organizations,<sup>28</sup> draws from complexity science and its "basic unit of analysis," the complex adaptive system.<sup>29</sup> Complex adaptive systems are "neural-like networks of interacting, interdependent agents who are bonded in a cooperative dynamic by a common goal, outlook, need, etc."<sup>30</sup> Such systems are characterized by "rich connectivity,"<sup>31</sup> in which the constituents of the system itself, as well as the system and its environment,<sup>32</sup> interact and change "in unexpected and irreversible ways."<sup>33, 34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Walumbwa, Avolio, and Harnell, 934; Phillip V. Lewis, *Transformational Leadership: A New Model for Total Church Involvement* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 6–7.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Uhl-Bien and Russ Marion, "Complexity Leadership in Bureaucratic Forms of Organizing: A Meso Model," *The Leadership Quarterly* 20 (2009), 631.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion, and Bill McKelvey, "Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting Leadership from the Industrial Age to the Knowledge Age," *The Leadership Quarterly* 18 (2007): 299.

<sup>30</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, McKelvey, 299.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Uhl-Bien and Michael Arena, "Complexity Leadership: Enabling People and Organizations for Adaptability," *Organizational Dynamics* 46 (2017): 9.

<sup>32</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, McKelvey, 302.

<sup>33</sup> Uhl-Bien and Arena, 9.

<sup>34</sup> A favorite illustration of complexity among scholars is mayonnaise. When the ingredients used to make mayonnaise are mixed together, they are changed in such a way that something entirely new is created. The original ingredients cannot be separated from the resulting product; neither can the mayonnaise be fully understood simply by analyzing its ingredients. Another favorite illustration of complexity scholars is to contrast *complexity* with *complicated*. Complicated systems are those in which the constituents are not changed when they come together and interact; as such, a complicated system can be deconstructed into its component parts. In addition, complicated systems, regardless of their size, can be understood by analyzing the component parts. Therefore, while mayonnaise is complex, a jumbo jet is



Complexity leadership theory, then, “frames leadership as a complex interactive dynamic from which adaptive outcomes (e.g., learning, innovation, and adaptability) emerge,”<sup>35</sup> rather than as a top-down, hierarchical function that relies on position and authority. The model incorporates three distinct types of leadership:<sup>36</sup>

- Administrative leadership is concerned with organizational tasks, such as planning, establishing vision, setting goals, acquiring resources, implementing programs, and managing conflicts. Administrative leadership attends to the bureaucratic structures and needs that allow the organization to function on a day-to-day basis, while at the same time not suppressing entrepreneurialism and innovation.
- Adaptive leadership is an informal “collaborative change movement”<sup>37</sup> that produces new, creative knowledge and ideas. It is the primary source of change within an organization. While adaptive leadership can be associated with a person, it most often “originates in struggles among agents and groups over conflicting needs, ideas, or preferences.”<sup>38</sup>
- Enabling leadership serves as a bridge between the administrative and adaptive functions. Enabling leadership fosters the conditions that allow adaptive leadership to flourish, and spearheads the incorporation of the products of adaptive leadership into the structure and function of the organization.

Each of these types of leadership takes place at all levels of an organization, and none is confined to those in specific

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complicated. See, for example: Uhl-Bien and Arena, 9-10; Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 302; and Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems* (London: Routledge, 1998), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 298.

<sup>36</sup> For the description of the three types of leadership within the complexity leadership model, see Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 306–309.

<sup>37</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey 306.

<sup>38</sup> Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 306.

positions or with particular titles. In addition, any person within an organization could, according to the theory, exhibit “any or all” of the three leadership types<sup>39</sup> in a given context or situation. In the case of The Growing Church, for example, Matthews demonstrates administrative leadership when preaching sermons designed to keep the church’s vision and mission at the forefront of congregants’ minds. The deacons continually provide administrative leadership by managing the business of the church, including overseeing the church’s physical property and assets. The congregation’s response to the many seeds that eventually yielded The Growing Church is an example of adaptive leadership; although individuals certainly played important roles in the process, the church’s collective engagement with the seeds was the primary source of change. Burke fulfilled an enabling leadership function by locating a property that would allow the church’s desire for environmental stewardship to become a reality. The elders exhibit ongoing enabling leadership as they empower ideas and move them to action. Taken together, all of these instances and individuals provide leadership of the complex adaptive system that is The Growing Church.

### **Harvesting: Insights into Leadership for Change**

Perhaps few churches can relate to the dramatic transformation that led from Fairview Denominational Church to The Growing Church. Perhaps even fewer churches aspire to such a transformation. Nevertheless, the case study offers insights that could inform leadership for change in other congregational settings.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Sibout G. Nooteboom and Catrein J.A.M. Termeer, “Strategies of Complexity Leadership in Governance Systems,” *International Review of Public Administration* 18(1) (2013), 26.

<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to The Growing Church, the Rev. Dr. Robin Matthews, Linda D. Burke, Esq., and Randy Horst for their participation in this case study, which made these insights possible.

First, an exodus of church members during a time of transition is not necessarily something to be feared. While unity in the church is desired, and while it would be unethical to pressure particular members to leave the church's fellowship, a parting of ways might be in the best interest of the departing congregants as well as the remaining congregation. When members who do not espouse the church's new direction voluntarily disassociate themselves, there is less division within the congregation and more support for the change initiative, thereby giving it a greater likelihood of success. In addition, the departing members are afforded an opportunity to find a church in which they can be fully engaged in the life and ministry of the congregation.

Second, leaders should be aware that transformation might not occur as the outcome of a single, discrete initiative, but might rather result from a series of "seeds," or smaller change initiatives, that together, over time, lead to a new future. Navigating incremental change initiatives requires patience, adaptability, and the ability to take a long view.

Third, the ability of a church to understand and embrace its particular identity during times of change is of vital importance. A church has a core identity that springs from its theology. A church also has an identity that encompasses its personality, culture, and norms. Churches that understand and embrace each of these identities have a stronger foundation from which to intentionally and constructively engage change.

Fourth, a church is a both faith community and a social institution. As such, theological and organization development resources can provide valuable perspectives in times of change.<sup>41</sup> Churches that rely on an organization development perspective to the exclusion of a theological

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<sup>41</sup> This is not to imply that all organization development resources or perspectives are applicable to church settings, however.

perspective, however, risk losing sight of the very things that provide a church with its identity and purpose.

Finally, “church leaders,” whether clergy or laypersons, should recognize that they are not the only persons who provide leadership within a congregation. Regardless of a church’s polity, leadership is distributed among clergy and laypersons, in formal structures and informal networks, between those who are in official positions and those who are not. Leadership for change is a shared endeavor, and those involved may draw from different theories or approaches based on individual strengths, the task at hand, and the congregational context.

### **Gleaning: Final Thoughts**

This case study has told the story of one church that overcame the deep-seated resistance to change found in most congregations. While The Growing Church’s story provides insights that could inform leadership for change in other congregational settings, it is nevertheless one church’s story. As such, it is descriptive, not prescriptive. Each church will have its own story, and each story will have its own insights. As churches continue to grapple with overcoming resistance to change and adapting to the shifting religious landscape in the United States, additional scholarship that attends to issues such as power and authority, the theologies of leadership and change, and the experience of change from pastoral and congregational perspectives is warranted.

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